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FM AMEMBASSY CONAKRY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3667
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CONAKRY 000266

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [GV](#)

SUBJECT: VOTER REGISTRATION COMES TO A TEMPORARY HALT, BUT
CENI CLAIMS ELECTIONS ARE STILL ON TRACK

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF SHANNON CAZEAU FOR REASON 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Guinea's National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) has temporarily suspended the voter registration process in order to take stock of progress to date and address continued funding challenges. Approximately 70% of voters have been registered so far. The CENI President remains optimistic about the prospects for elections in 2009, at least in terms of fulfilling the CENI's responsibilities. At the same time, likely challenges ahead and recent statements by the CNDD President suggest that elections are likely to be much further down the road. END SUMMARY.

VOTER REGISTRATION SUSPENDED, NOT CLOSED

¶2. (SBU) Pol/Econ Chief met with Ben Sekou Syllah, the President of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) on May 5 to discuss the status of the national voter registration campaign. Syllah clarified that the campaign is not yet closed despite press reports to the contrary, but rather, temporarily suspended. He estimated that approximately 70% of voters have been registered to date - close to 90% in the interior with lower numbers in the capital.

¶3. (SBU) Syllah explained that he decided to call a halt to the process primarily because they were already five months in arrears in paying salaries and expenses to registrars and local CENI representatives. With monthly expenses totaling approximately \$1.25 million, Syllah estimated that workers are now due over \$6 million. When Pol/Econ Chief pointed out that the Guinean Government is responsible for paying these expenses, Syllah sidestepped the issue, saying "all I know is I need the money in my budget." (COMMENT. The GoG is responsible for paying the bulk of these expenses and has been promising the funds since before the coup. END COMMENT).

¶4. (SBU) Although the financial issue was identified as the major impediment, Syllah said he also wanted to suspend the process because he needs some time to evaluate what has already been accomplished in order to strategically target any areas that still need attention. In addition, he wants to start downloading the registration data and begin developing a national voter list. "In two or three weeks, we'll know where we're at and then we can focus on what remains."

ALL IS WELL, THINGS MOVE FORWARD

¶5. (C) On the issue of funding, Syllah said he was very happy to report that the Minister of Finance had called him that week and promised to release 15 billion GnF (a little

more than \$3 million) within a week. However, he later said that this amount is little more than a token since much more is needed. Syllah commented that the Minister of Finance had never called him before and that he saw the personal promise as a sign of the GoG's sincere intentions to move elections forward.

¶6. (C) When Pol/Econ Chief asked whether elections would move forward in October as planned, Syllah replied "the month is not really important, but certainly by the end of the year...we will be ready by December." He also commented "anyway, it's not me who decides, it is the president." As the discussion turned to questions of political will, Syllah said he believes CNDD President Moussa Dadis Camara is sincere in his intentions to hold elections, but that members of his entourage are encouraging him to delay.

WHO NEEDS UNITY?

¶7. (SBU) With respect to Les Forces Vives, Syllah admitted that the group lacks unity as a whole, but asserted that unity is not all that important. "Why do they need unity...they all agree on the end objective." Pol/Econ Chief pointed out that in fact they do not all agree on the end objective since various groups are advocating different transition timelines, some with elections far down the road. At this point, Syllah said "it is better than nothing." He later commented that there is internal divergence within Les Forces Vives, they still present a united front.

CONAKRY 00000266 002 OF 002

COMMENTS ON VOTER REGISTRATION FROM THE INTERIOR

¶8. (SBU) During a trip to the Boke region of Guinea the following day, Pol/Econ Chief spoke with two government representatives of the sub-prefecture of Sangaredi. The elected community official said that he still had two districts in which the voter registration process has not yet been launched. However, the sous-prefect claimed that the region had already registered 106% of its estimated voters. He attributed the discrepancy to higher than anticipated numbers of people who had recently moved to the region in order to take advantage of the mining based economy.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) Syllah was a prominent and outspoken civil society leader before his appointment to the CENI, eager to share his opinions and analysis of Guinean politics. However, after more than a year into the job, he is increasingly careful about what he says in meetings with Embassy officials. His reticence may be linked to his need for international donor assistance to accomplish his mission, but it is quite clear that he is essentially towing the official government line.

¶10. (SBU) Although Syllah maintains that elections will happen by the end of the year, he is quick to dismiss the formidable challenges ahead. The funding issue remains unresolved, which will likely make it difficult to restart the registration process. At the same time, the country is quickly approaching its rainy season, which will force the process to a standstill. In the meantime, Dadis has been making problematic statements in the press. Over the weekend, he described the agreed upon election timeline as little more than a decision made on paper rather than a concrete commitment. He accused the political parties and the international community of trying to assert undue pressure and warned that he would not be intimidated. Despite Syllah's assurances to the contrary, a number of

indicators suggest that elections before the end of 2009 are increasingly unlikely. END COMMENT.
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